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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 006595

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/MLS, INR, S/CT
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/17/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: DEEP ANGER FOLLOWING TEMPLE
ATTACK

REF: BANGKOK 6093

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY/COMMENT: During the early morning hours of October 16 a Buddhist monk and two novices were killed during a brutal attack on a Buddhist temple in the far southern province of Pattani. In the wake of the incident, Prime Minister Thaksin has vowed swift justice against those involved in the murders. The temple murders, following the September mob killings of two Marines, is an extremely inflammatory event that appears to be another attempt to create divisions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the South and provoke a harsh government crackdown. END SUMMARY/COMMENT

THREE KILLED IN TEMPLE ATTACK

¶2. (SBU) On October 16 at approximately 1230 a.m. a group of as many as twenty assailants attacked a Buddhist temple in the Ponare district of Pattani province. Local police and press accounts report that the attackers used rifles and shotguns to fire into temple dwellings, killing two teenage novices before setting fire to the structures and destroying Buddha statues and other temple property. The assailants also brutally killed a 76 year old monk, using a knife to stab and nearly behead him.

¶3. (SBU) Separately, local police confirmed a near simultaneous arson attack on a multi-purpose building in another part of the Ponare District. A number of spray-painted messages were left at this scene, including: "You killed the innocent Malay people, I'll kill the innocent Siamese." Meanwhile, there are press reports that large numbers of Buddhist monks have suspended activities in the deep South, or are preparing to leave the region in the wake of the murders. The director of the Buddhist Office in Yala said he expects half of the monks in his province to move out of the province because of fears they would be targeted for future attacks.

¶4. (C) These murders follow the September 21 mob murders of two Thai Marines who were being held hostage at a Muslim village in Narathiwat (reftel). This incident sparked widespread public outrage and the attention of the royal family.

ANOTHER "TRAP" FOR THE GOVERNMENT

¶5. (C) Following the September murders RTG authorities vowed a measured response -- despite widespread public calls for reprisals. Senior Thai officials told us following the September attacks that they were aware that these types of incidents were "traps" meant to provoke a harsh response and attract international attention. During an October 13 meeting with the Ambassador, Deputy Prime Minister Chidchai again vowed that the government would not fall into the "trap" the militants were setting by attempting to provoke a crackdown in order to draw attention to their cause.

¶6. (C) However, following this latest incident, the government does not appear inclined to respond carefully. Prime Minister Thaksin reacted very strongly to the attacks, calling the murderers "sub-humans" who would be dealt "the swiftest punishment." He stated that security forces would be given additional leeway to go after the militants to "settle the score." Defense Minister Thammarak echoed these remarks, saying that lines of command would be trimmed in the South to allow security forces to be more aggressive.

¶7. (C) Prime Minister Thaksin's strong language in response to the attacks reflects the general public's outrage over the incident. Postings on popular Thai websites and text messages sent to radio and TV call-in programs have been filled with strong, sometimes racist, messages against southern Thai Muslims -- similar to those seen following the September murders. The timing of this attack -- in the middle of Ramadan, one week before the anniversary of Tak Bai, and while the Queen is in neighboring Narathiwat -- makes the incident even more inflammatory.

COMMENT: RELATIONS CONTINUE TO DETERIORATE

18. (C) As noted above, there are officials in the Thai government who understand this incident for what it is: another "trap" set to provoke a harsh response that will attract international attention and further estrange the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the South. However, judging by the comments from administration leaders the government appears to be reacting to public calls for a counter stroke.

19. (C) Relations between the local communities have long been on a downward trend. Over the past year we have witnessed and reported on deteriorating relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the South; including apparent deliberate attempts to intimidate Buddhists into leaving the region. This latest attacks is a continuation of this trend. (NOTE: A Pattani based reporter told emboffs that there have already been whispers among local Buddhists calling for a revenge attack against a Muslim mosque. END NOTE). In this vein, this latest incident should not be seen as a reflection of genuine religious intolerance by local Muslims, but rather another calculated provocation by militants to spark sectarian strife in order to further the separatist agenda. Thaksin's tough talk is troubling, but the security forces have, overall, exercised restrain in recent months, and many seem to understand the danger of responding with excessive force. Nonetheless, this latest attack will test the government's resolve. END COMMENT
BOYCE